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The Great American Trailer Park Musical

By Solange De Santis

A quick winter getaway to Florida can be found at the Majestic Theater in West Springfield, Mass. starting January 4, but the destination is far from a luxury resort. The low-rent, white-trash, teased-hair, folding-aluminum-lawn-chair, muscle-shirt, chain-smoking version of a warm-weather holiday takes place at Armadillo Acres, the setting for *The Great American Trailer Park Musical*. It's The Theater Project's third show of the season, running through Feb. 11.

A visit to Armadillo Acres, named after an armored slow-moving highway and garden pest, won't involve candlelight dinners or leisurely walks on the beach, since the residents are far too caught up in their personal melodramas.

Toll booth collector Norbert would like to celebrate his 20th wedding anniversary with Jeannie by getting her out of their mobile home, which she's refused to leave since their baby son was kidnapped nearly two decades ago. An "exotic dancer" named Pippi, on the run from a wild boyfriend, rents the trailer next door and becomes an object of desire for Norbert. A trio of female neighbors – Lin (short for "Linoleum" since her mother gave birth on the kitchen floor), Betty and Pickles – narrates the action.

"It's a lot of fun," said Danny Eaton, producing director of The Theater Project and director of *The Great American Trailer Park Musical*. The show premiered two years ago at the New York Musical Theatre Festival, then ran off-Broadway and closed about a year ago. "When the rights became available, I snagged it. I wanted to find something not done in this area before. This is a smaller-cast musical and it's a good time of year to come out and sit back and enjoy something light," said Eaton in an interview.

Among the performers, Amy Rist, who plays Pickles, will be familiar to Theater Project audiences, said Eaton, as she played lead roles in such recent shows as *Cabaret* and *Side Show*. Set design is by Amy Davis and choreography (yes, there are dance numbers at the mobile homes) is by Liz Zieminski.

Music and lyrics are by David Nehls, who has also written a musical based on the classic film *It's A Wonderful Life*, and his score encompasses blues, boogie-woogie, ballads, country and '80s nostalgia. His lyrics might be said to express trailer park soul, as a troubled Jeannie sings that she is determined to "make like a nail and press on." (Men may need to turn to a female companion for interpretation of that joke.) "Some of the songs are really funny and some are heartfelt," commented Eaton.

Writer and comedienne Betsy Kelso's book treats her redneck characters with love, but paints them with a broad brush. As if kidnapping, agoraphobia, striptease and dangerous love aren't enough for the Armadillo residents, the show also includes "hysterical pregnancy," a broken electric chair, kleptomania, the Ice Capades and a peculiar component of American cuisine, spray-on cheese. "When we went into rehearsal, the challenge was to not make it into a cartoon. Although these are trailer park characters, we have to treat them as real people. The danger is in turning it into sketch comedy," recalled Eaton.

Compared to some recent musicals produced by The Theater Project, such as *Miss Saigon* and *Lady Day*, this production "is a little bit of a different show than we've done in the past," said Eaton, with "a little bit of everything."

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